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# THE INTELLECTUAL POWERS OF WOMAN.

BY PROFESSOR FABIAN FRANKLIN.

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THE NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW for September contains a spirited discussion by Mrs. G. G. Buckler of several aspects of the woman question. Of these it is the object of the present paper to consider one only : that which Mrs. Buckler presents in the form of the inquiry, Has woman ever produced, or is she likely to produce, anything first-rate in the higher branches of literature, science, or art ?

After a rapid survey of the field Mrs. Buckler answers the first half of this question with a decided negative ; on the second half, in the only formal statement she makes concerning it, she holds to a position of judicial doubt. " Women have never yet attained," she says, " the highest rank in science, literature, or art. Whether they ever will do so is, of course, a mere matter of opinion, and here it is well carefully to discriminate facts from theories." And she proceeds to reject with something approaching contempt the *a priori* arguments which have been advanced to show that women are of necessity precluded from high intellectual achievements.

Did this passage represent the whole drift of the article, the present writer would have no quarrel with it. It is true that woman has never yet attained the highest rank in science, literature, or art. It is also true that the question whether she ever will or not is a mere matter of opinion—or rather of purely speculative conjecture. But the formal disclaimer thus made of any decision as to the possibilities of the future is not in agreement with the judgments expressed with emphasis at various points in the article. No reader can lay it down without the feeling that the author holds the facts of history to be conclusive as to the

limitations of woman's intellectual powers. Thus, after speaking of women mathematicians, Mrs. Buckler says: "Yet, taken all in all, these few individual instances of female achievement in science serve only to prove the rule that women as discoverers are inferior to men." So far as literature is concerned she is even more explicit when she says: "Probably woman's kind in literature will always be found to be the humbler species, the lyric and especially the hymn, letter-writing and domestic novels." But what is more to the purpose is the general drift of the whole article, which is clearly and emphatically to the effect that, in literature at least, women have had ample opportunity to show their powers, and that the result of the test has been a demonstration of hopeless inferiority; and that a similar test, not quite so conclusive, yet practically sufficient, has established the same result in the other two great departments of intellectual activity.

That the facts of history are not only not conclusive, but cannot properly be regarded as establishing even a presumption concerning the limitations of the intellectual powers of woman, it is the object of the present paper to show. Strange as the assertion may at first blush appear, it is nevertheless true that the presumption that women are incapable of the highest intellectual achievement may far more reasonably be based upon mere ordinary impressions than upon anything which historical experience has thus far been able to furnish. If a man feels it in his bones that no woman could possibly write a poem as great as "*Paradise Lost*" or evolve a body of mathematical doctrine like that of the "*Disquisitiones Arithmeticae*," his state of mind is the result of a vast array of experiences, for the most part absorbed unconsciously, but not the less valuable on that account. A conviction arrived at in this way it is difficult to dislodge or weaken. But when the position is taken, as it has been taken by so many previous writers, as well as by Mrs. Buckler, that women have historically demonstrated their incapacity for such triumphs by not yet having achieved them, it is not difficult to show that the argument is thoroughly unsound.

The first and most vital defect in all these discussions is their total neglect of the question of numbers. "No woman has attained the *highest* rank in science, literature, or art"—granted. But in all the ages of the world there have been but a handful of

men who have attained this rank ; and only an utterly insignificant fraction of the female sex can be regarded as having been in any sense in the running for these high honors. Among the writers who hold Mrs. Buckler's view, one never finds the slightest attempt to take into account the relation of these numbers. With all but an insignificant fraction of the sex ruled out, would not women have contributed more than their quota if they had furnished even *one* name to the list of immortals ?

The force of this inquiry will become much more apparent if we turn aside for a moment from the woman question. Take our own great country, and ask whether any American has attained the *highest* rank in science, literature, or art. We have had no Newton, no Darwin, no Gauss ; there has not only been no American Shakespeare or Dante, but no American Goethe or Burns ; and neither Beethoven nor Michel Angelo has even a distant relative on the roll of American glory. Does it enter any one's mind to infer, hence, that Americans are intrinsically incapable of the greatest triumphs in science, in literature, or in art ? And yet the number of American men who have in the past hundred years been placed in circumstances conducive to the accomplishment of great work is incomparably larger than that of all the women who have ever been so placed.

Other examples will point the moral quite as strikingly. Take the history of German literature. Between the romances and songs of chivalry which were produced in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the revival of German literature in the eighteenth century, there lies a dreary interval of five hundred years during which Germany produced not a single literary figure of importance, to say nothing of "the highest rank." And all this time her universities were keeping up the love of learning ; she had ancient capitals and historic courts ; she went through the stimulating experience of the Protestant Reformation, and it was within her bounds and during this period that the art of printing was invented. Or, again, take Scotland. An Englishman writing in the year 1750 could far more justly have said of Scotchmen than any one can to-day say of women, that historical experience had proved that we could not expect from them writings capable of attracting the attention or influencing the thought of the world. Yet the next half-century found Scotland furnishing to philosophy the pre-eminent name of Hume,

to political economy the illustrious Adam Smith, to poetry Burns, and to prose Walter Scott.

One is tempted here to introduce examples in which the course of history has been the reverse of this—cases where a period of glory has been followed by ages of utter insignificance. Of these, incomparably the most striking is that of Greece, or, let us say, of Athens. But the phenomenon presented by the magnificent flowering of Greek genius in a single century, followed by two millenia of obscurity, illustrates much more than this lesson of numbers, and may well serve to introduce the second great defect of the historical argument against the capabilities of women. For not only has almost the entire mass of womankind, in all historic ages up to the last two or three decades, been practically placed completely out of the running, but the extremely small minority from whom high achievement might possibly be expected have been wholly cut off from those influences which have, in the case of men, so great a share in the stimulation of ambition and the development of genius. Men who have had the spark of genius or even of talent in them have been spurred to effort by all their surroundings, by the traditions of the race, by rivalry with their comrades, by the admiration which the opposite sex accords to brilliant achievements, by the dread of disappointing the high expectations of relatives and friends, by the thousand nameless forces which impel and animate to exertion. What of all this has there been for women? How many have been so placed as to even think of an intellectual career as a possibility? Of these few, how many have been otherwise than solitary in their youthful aspirations and efforts? None has had the goad of the humiliation of failure to urge her on, for from none was anything great expected or looked for. And the very absorption in a high intellectual interest, which in the case of a boy would be hailed with delight even by the humblest parents as an earnest of future greatness, was, in the case of girls, up to the last two or three decades, universally condemned and repressed and thwarted even in the most cultivated families.

There is, of course, a very easy answer to all this. Genius, it will be said, rises superior to all obstacles, and will manifest itself in spite of all disadvantages. The widespread acceptance of this comfortable doctrine is an interesting example of the way in which opinions, which when examined are seen to be mutually

contradictory, may jog along together in the same mind without inconvenience. The same persons who hold this view of the infinite resources of genius will accept without hesitation the current explanation of the brilliant periods in the intellectual history of the world, or of a particular nation. But if the greatness of English literature in the time of Elizabeth is to be explained by reference to the glories of her reign in arms and adventure and statesmanship; if it is not to be considered an accident that Italy's pre-eminence in art and literature was coincident with the period when her rival states were at their highest point of wealth and political importance and civic pride; if Augustus had something to do with the Augustan age, and we find it quite natural that Virgil and Horace wrote then, and not in the reign of Augustulus; if we find a line of succession like Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, or like Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and recognize in it something most impressive, indeed, but nothing abnormal or miraculous; if we see nothing strange in the failure of the Greek race to produce a single world-name in two thousand years, after having, within the compass of a century and a half, furnished a considerable fraction of all the names on the brief list of the world's greatest men—if all these things are so, what becomes of the notion that inborn genius will triumph over all adversity of circumstance? In one breath we recognize that intellectual glory can be looked for only when the spirit of the time and the conditions of the national life are favorable to it; shall we say, the next moment, that genius is sure to assert itself under all circumstances? Evidently the two positions are incompatible.

So much for the inconsistency of the notion that "genius will out" with the all but universally accepted view that great things are, as a rule, done only in times somehow favorable to greatness. That it is the first, and not the second, of these doctrines which is at fault may easily be shown almost to demonstration; one has only to run over any list of the world's intellectual heroes, and strike out those who belonged to some great period. Leave only the solitary giants who arose unheralded and alone, who wrote noble verse in an ignoble time or made immortal works of art for a down-trodden or mean-spirited people, or extended the bounds of human knowledge at a time when learning was held in contempt. Is it necessary actually to go through the task?

Is it not plain at once that, if it were performed, the splendid roll of immortals would shrink almost to nothing? And yet, if this be so, it is clear that, far from being sure to triumph over all the obstacles of circumstance, native genius depends almost invariably for its fruitful development upon influences to which it, along with meaner endowments, is subjected. By this is not to be understood any approval of the evolutionary cant which at one time was so prevalent and which asserted that works of genius were a mere "product" of the environment. The environment cannot make a genius, and cannot "evolve" his work. On the other hand, however, genius is not endowed with omnipotence, but, as common sense would indicate, and as historic experience amply demonstrates, it may be powerfully helped or fatally hindered by the atmosphere which it finds itself compelled to breathe.

But the ordinary differences of atmosphere between one age and another, which we thus readily recognize to have an influence so powerful upon literature and art, are insignificant in comparison with the difference between the atmosphere which has surrounded women and the atmosphere which has surrounded men in all times. To suppose that absolute *exclusion* from the opportunities of culture is the only important factor that has to be taken into account would be to overlook in this question what all acknowledge as of predominant importance when we are considering the history of civilization at large. Most vital of all the adverse influences, except such absolute exclusion, has been the prevalent sentiment as to what is fitting and commendable, as well as the prevalent estimate of what is possible, to women. The effect of such influences has been well expressed by Colonel Higginson: "Systematically discourage any individual, from birth to death, and they learn, in nine cases out of ten, to acquiesce in their degradation, if not to claim it as a crown of glory. If the Abbé Choisy praised the Duchesse de Fontanges for being 'beautiful as an angel and silly as a goose,' it was natural that all the young ladies of the court should resolve to make up in folly what they wanted in charms."

Only those of us who are very young have any need of historical research to assure ourselves that up to an extremely recent date there was not one person in a hundred, of either sex, who did not look upon a really learned woman as a monstrosity. And

yet it is instructive to take an occasional glance farther back and find, for instance, that when, in the sixteenth century, Francoise de Saintanges wished to establish girls' schools in France, she was hooted at in the streets and her father called together four doctors learned in the law to decide whether she was not possessed by the devil to think of educating women ("*pour s'assurer qu'instruire des femmes n'était pas un oeuvre du démon*"); or that Fénelon held virgin delicacy to be almost as incompatible with learning as with vice; or that Dr. Gregory, in his book *A Legacy to His Daughters*, which seems to have been regarded as a standard work on female propriety at the end of the eighteenth century, utters such warnings as this: "Be cautious even in displaying your good sense; it will be thought you assume a superiority over the rest of the company. But, if you have any learning, keep it a profound secret, especially from the men, who generally look with a jealous and malignant eye on a woman of great parts and a cultivated understanding." Every one knows that the two women who in our century have won most distinction by their mathematical work had to acquire the elements of the science surreptitiously and in the face of unyielding parental opposition, though both belonged to families of culture and high social standing. No one fails to see that this was getting knowledge under difficulties; but few realize the more important lesson that it teaches. For who shall say how many girls may have had mathematical powers greater than Mrs. Somerville's or Madame Kovalewski's, without possessing those other qualities which braced these two to fly in the face of what they had been steadily taught from infancy to regard as right and becoming in a woman?

One might go on almost indefinitely, pointing out the vast differences between the motives and ideals of the two sexes. But these considerations will easily occur to every one. The youthful dreams and aspirations of a gifted boy cluster around high achievement and resounding fame, because all that he hears and reads tends to arouse in him such ambitions; from earliest childhood, a girl learns to look forward to quite other things as her ideal. Beginning with the fairy tale and going on through poetry and romance and the talk of real life, the only thing which is held up to her as praiseworthy is the tender ministering to the needs of those around her; and it is the conquest of men



by beauty and charm which is presented to her imagination as the one triumph that a woman prizes. The very girls who are most capable of great work, those possessing an abounding vitality, high spirits, the pride of life, are sure to go in for the great prize of happiness, and they cannot unite the winning of that prize with intellectual work so long as intellectual work is regarded as unfeminine.

But it is not my purpose to make an exhaustive list of the hindrances to woman's intellectual achievements. I have wished merely to fasten attention upon them, and to show their bearing upon that matter of numbers, which, while it is the vital element of the whole question, is so strangely ignored by the supporters of the view maintained in the article under discussion. Let us quote one or two passages from it. "Taking literature as our first topic, we find women from the earliest days expressing their thoughts in verse and prose. Yet as real poets we can only mention the half mythical Sappho, and possibly, in our own day, Mrs. Browning and Christina Rossetti." "Women from the earliest days"; yes, but how many, and under what circumstances? "In physics and mathematics we find feminine enthusiasts at quite an early date. . . . Yet, taken all in all, these few individual instances of female achievement in science serve only to prove the rule that women as discoverers are inferior to men." In such a dictum the fact is entirely lost sight of that the whole number of women who acquired the elements of the infinitesimal calculus, in the two centuries from its creation by Newton and Leibnitz, to the opening of Vassar College in 1865, was probably less than the number of mathematical honor men the single University of Cambridge turns out in a single year. Yet of the ten thousand men or so whom the University of Cambridge has, within the past hundred years, stamped with her certificate of honor, after a course of training upon which that stronghold of English mathematics concentrates all her powers, only two, or at most three, have achieved high rank as discoverers in pure mathematics.

In drawing conclusions like those just cited, writers continually forget that great distinction is, *ex vi termini*, an extremely rare thing. The truth is, that they are impelled to their conclusion, not so much by the facts which they cite in support of it, as by a predisposition to believe it. Of this predisposition

they may themselves be entirely unconscious ; but that it exists is shown by their failure to draw like inferences from similar and indeed much stronger premises, where there is no foregone conclusion to point the way. Almost every word, for instance, that is said of the failure of women to achieve the very highest distinction in science, literature, and art, may be said with equal truth of Americans, and with vastly greater emphasis of the inhabitants of almost any of our great States, say Pennsylvania ; yet no one thinks of inferring from this that Americans or Pennsylvanians are utterly barred by inherent defect from ever attaining the highest intellectual glory. It will be a long time before women may be truthfully said to have had a test in comparison with men anything like as fair as that which Americans have had, or perhaps even that which Pennsylvanians have had, in comparison with the world at large ; but because America has produced no Dante, no Newton, no Beethoven, it does not enter any one's mind to conclude that the middle heights of fame must be the limit of an American's ambition.

But this is not the only way in which the predisposition to a foregone conclusion manifests itself. I have freely granted the literal correctness of the assertion that women have not in any department achieved the very highest distinction ; but when it comes to drawing a much lower line than this, and asserting that women have never come up to it, the case is very different. Writers adopting the view which Mrs. Buckler holds are very apt to betray the kind of bias that shows itself in the famous *jeu d'esprit* about German scholarship written before the days of Germany's pre-eminence in philology :

" The Germans in Greek  
Are sadly to seek ;  
All save only Hermann  
And Hermann's a German."

Work which, if done by a man, would be regarded as falling little short of the highest, takes on in the minds of these writers a feminine littleness or limitation, for no discoverable reason except that the author of it was a woman. Why, for instance, does Mrs. Buckler repeatedly speak of the "domestic" novel as marking the limits of woman's possibilities in the art of fiction ? Could anything be more gratuitous ? Is *Romola* a domestic novel ? I take *Brockhaus' Encyclopædia*, which happens to be

at my side, and find that this German authority describes it as "a picture of the Italian Renaissance of the last half of the fifteenth century, drawn with a master hand." We all know that it is this and much more ; and evidently the writer omitted to mention specifically, in so condensed an account, its other high qualities only because he had just given the following characterization of the earlier novel, *Adam Bede* : "Its excellences are a development of character as profound as it is brilliant, true epic force and richness, a style of extraordinary individuality and purity, and a highly original representation of English provincial life." Does one speak in this way of a mere "domestic novel" ? In what derogatory sense can any of George Eliot's novels be so designated ? And yet the belittlement implied in the words is heightened by the context ; for we find hymn-making, letter-writing, and the composing of domestic novels put together as constituting that "humbler species" in literature which "woman's kind" not only has always been, but "probably will always be found to be."

This underestimation of woman's achievement in a direction in which many women have been distinguished and a few have been truly great is so remarkable, and is so instructive as showing how large a part unconscious bias may play in these judgments, that I shall dwell upon it a moment longer, and forego all criticism of estimates of feminine performance in other fields, which, though not open to so strong an objection, are yet vitiated in the same manner. In a passage other than that just quoted we again find "letter-writing and novels of domestic life" coupled together on an apparently equal footing ; and here we find women's excellence in these departments ascribed to "their special demand for the feminine qualities of quick emotions and ready observation." Let me place alongside of this unfavorable estimate some words about George Sand written by the greatest of English critics :

"Whether or not the number of George Sand's 'works—always fresh, always attractive, but poured out too lavishly and rapidly—is likely to prove a hindrance to her fame, I do not care to consider. Posterity, alarmed at the way in which its literary baggage grows upon it, always seeks to leave behind it as much as it can, as much as it dares—everything but masterpieces. But the immense vibration of George Sand's voice upon the ear of Europe will not soon die away. Her passions and her errors have been abundantly talked of. She left them behind her, and men's memory of her will leave

them behind also. There will remain of her to mankind the sense of benefit and stimulus from the passage upon earth of that large and frank nature, of that large and pure utterance—the large utterance of the early gods.”\*

The object of this article was stated at the outset to be a negative one. Its purpose was to show that “the facts of history are not only not conclusive, but cannot properly be regarded as establishing even a presumption concerning the limitations of the intellectual powers of woman.” The positive proposition that women are capable of doing such work as has been done by a few score only of all the thousands of millions of men in the world’s history, I have made no attempt to establish. But that the absence, up to the present time, of supreme pre-eminence on the part of any woman cannot be allowed any logical weight in support of the conclusion that the sex is incapable of such distinction, I think the foregoing considerations sufficiently show. I have pointed out, in the first place, that those who draw such an inference entirely fail to pay regard to the all-important question of numbers; they forget for the time being how very rare the kind of achievement is upon the absence of which they base their conclusion. Great nations have gone on for hundreds of years without producing a single important literary figure; and it must be plain to any fair-minded person that the whole number of women in all nations and all times who may be said to have been so placed as justly to be considered in the comparison is far less than that of the men so placed in any great nation in a single century. It is only within the last few decades that any considerable number of girls have grown up with any other notion than that serious intellectual work in their sex is a monstrosity; and only in England and America has a different view of the matter been widely entertained even in our time, the “woman movement” having attained an important character in Germany only within the past five or ten years.

In the second place, I have endeavored to emphasize the fact that even this numerical exclusion of all but an extremely small fraction of the sex does not begin to measure the disadvantage of women in the comparison. Every one must recognize that the minute fraction which may properly be considered at all has not been surrounded by the atmosphere, affected by the agencies, im-

\*Matthew Arnold : *Mixed Essays*.

pelled by the stimuli, which exercise so incalculable an influence upon human achievement ; but there is a not unnatural tendency to think that after all there ought to have been *some* women who had risen superior to all these things. It is for this reason that I have dwelt on the utter absence of intellectual greatness in periods of national decadence, and on the universally acknowledged influence of general conditions upon the flourishing of literature, art, and science. But surely the ordinary differences in these conditions which have been uniformly found sufficient wholly to prevent the emergence of genius among men are insignificant in comparison with the unfavorable difference which has always existed in the conditions surrounding women, in every direction of intellectual effort.

A final word as to the importance or unimportance of the whole discussion. There would be no harm in leaving the question entirely open ; what is to be deplored is an erroneous belief that it has been settled. In a matter of keen human interest—however unsubstantial or speculative that interest may be—any error is to be deplored, simply as error. But in this case there is another and more special reason for regret. It is that the conclusion which I have been engaged in controverting is sure to be understood by the generality of people as meaning vastly more than in its exact terms it professes to convey. Even those who are not “the generality” slide imperceptibly into this exaggeration of its purport. The most that could be claimed as shown by history, even were the considerations adduced in the present article wholly ignored, would be that women cannot reach the highest heights ; yet we see the very able and gifted writer of the article to which this is a reply belittling achievements of members of her own sex which are of undeniable greatness, a thing which can hardly be ascribed to anything else than the bias due to a preconceived theory. Whether or not any woman can be as great as the greatest men, it is quite certain that some women can be as great as very great men ; for some women have been.

The capacity for doing excellent work in the most difficult departments of university study, positive experience has now shown to be no more abnormal among women than among men. Yet we see surviving to our own day—and probably, if the truth were known, still very widely entertained—the notion that, leaving out a possible *lusus naturæ* here and there, women are in-

capable of doing high university work. In a recent number of a prominent Review, I find a Lecturer on History in the University of Cambridge making the utterly ridiculous statement that he had "never seen a woman's papers equal to a man's"; which, if understood literally, would mean that the ablest of the women whose papers had ever come under his eye was not equal to the most stupid of the men. This doubtless is not what he meant to say, but the expression shows the persistence in his mind of an utterly baseless belief in woman's essential inferiority. Any one whose memory extends back twenty-five years will remember the time when the belief was practically universal that women were incapable of mastering the higher mathematics. Go back a little farther, and we find a schoolmaster in one of the principal towns of Massachusetts set down as a visionary because he proposed to undertake to teach girls fractions. A century ago no less a man than Kant declared the unfitness of women for the study of geometry. "It is generally believed in Germany," writes Professor Klein,\* one of the greatest of living mathematicians, "that mathematical studies are beyond the capacity of women"; but he assures us that the women who have attended the mathematical courses at Göttingen "have constantly shown themselves from every point of view as able as their male competitors." And it may be remarked that the mathematical work here referred to is as far beyond anything that was taught in America before the opening of the Johns Hopkins University as the work in our best colleges in those days was beyond that of a country school.

It is because the view combated in this article not only is lacking in foundation, but tends to strengthen the hold of beliefs which still cling to the majority of persons, though they have been amply proved to be erroneous, that I feel it to be important that it should be opposed. It is impossible to determine the relative powers of men and women; it will be long before experience can show, even with a moderate degree of probability, what limits there may be to the possibilities of woman in the realm of intellect. Let us not, in the meanwhile, belittle the actual work of women, in pursuance of a baseless dogma of essential inferiority. Let us refrain, for instance, from saying, with Mr. Gosse, that women cannot write poetry requiring art "because they lack the

\* "*Les Femmes dans la Science*." By A. Rebière. Paris, 1897. (Page 318.)

artistic impulse," when we know not only that they have written such poetry, but that paintings like those of Miss Mary Cassatt or Mme. Demont-Breton, not to speak of older names, show the possession of an extremely high artistic impulse. Let Americans, at least, not talk glibly of women's power in scientific discovery being essentially inferior to men's, until such time as some American mathematician receives as high recognition as that bestowed by the French Academy on the work of Sonia Kovalewski, the judgment being pronounced without knowledge of the writer's sex. Let us not regard the results of women's attempts in poetry and music as utterly fatal to aspirations however high, when we remember that our country has thus far produced neither a great composer nor, in the high sense of the word, a great poet. Let us not lay too great stress on the fact that "in dramatic literature no woman has ever gained for herself any lasting fame," when it is remembered that America has never produced a drama of even moderate excellence; while, on the other hand, I find Prof. Kuno Francke, of Harvard, saying in *The Nation* a few weeks ago, of a drama recently written by a German woman, Giesela von Arnim, the wife of Hermann Grimm, that its chief scene is "one of the most affecting in dramatic literature," that the personages of the play are "characters of genuine grandeur," and that in it the longings and aspirations of the author have "found a supreme poetic expression." In a word, as to what woman may do in the future, let us frankly acknowledge that the future alone can decide, the experience of the past being far too slight to furnish the materials for a forecast; and as to what women have done in the past, or are doing in the present, let us recognize it as what it is, and not as what, in accordance with an unproven generalization, we imagine it must of necessity be.

FABIAN FRANKLIN.